

A Pleasant Birthday Party August 27, 1878

A cool and pleasant ride by rail along the South Shore landed me at the Duxbury Station on a pleasant August afternoon, just in season to receive an invitation to a birthday party at the ancient "Alden House."

Within a few years the railway track has invaded its quietness and the broad and sunny pastures which only the cows and school children traversed daily, resounds to the shriek of the steam whistle and answers to the gaze of the antiquarian and tourist.

The house stands only a few rods from the station and is a large, two-storied, unpainted dwelling. It faces the South, irrespective of any road like all the houses of the early settlers. It is over 200 years old and was built by Jonathan Alden, son of John of Pilgrim memory. Nearby and on the edge of Eagle Tree Pond, stood the house where John and Priscilla commenced their married life in Duxbury. This house was, of course, a rough structure and the thick forest lay between them and the Plymouth settlement. Ten miles away, and on the south within easy distance yet not too near for comfort, lived Miles Standish and Elder Brewster. History tells us this was the next year after the landing at Plymouth and one wonders how they dared to settle so far apart with neighboring Indians ready at any time to break out into open hostility. Rough paths through the wilderness and across marshlands were their only means of communication and visits must have been infrequent. Imagination must supply what the scanty records have denied. We could hardly expect the historian, Bradford, would furnish us with much entertainment of Pilgrim domestic life when he gives so meagre an account of the loss of his wife, Dorothy, and the coming of Alice Southworth, his second wife. The Governor's record says simply of the arrival of the Ann on which Mrs. Southworth came at his request "that there were many useful persons on board." Today the bright water of the bay sparkles on the eastern horizon as clear and blue as it did two centuries ago when only Indian canoes skirted its shores, or the Mayflower wails whitened its waters. Now, the Gurnet Light stands sentinel and the white-winged boats skim merrily over the waters. The air comes cool and fresh from the ocean bearing me a pleasant welcome to my native town.

After partially satisfying our gaze with an outside view of this historic place we will enter the mansion and pay our respects to the honored hostess, Mrs. John Alden or Aunt Polly. A little, cheery old lady with bright black eyes and quick step comes to greet us, giving us a cordial welcome. It is her 90th birthday and family, friends and acquaintances have gathered to celebrate the family, friends and acquaintances have gathered to celebrate the event. In appearance she is about 75, wears no glasses except when reading or sewing, hears quickly and except for a lameness would be in possession of all of her faculties. No one of the company had a more hearty enjoyment of the occasion than Aunt Polly, whose heart has kept fresh and young through the snows of 90 winters which have frosted her locks and somewhat stiffened her limbs. For seven years she has lived quite a solitary life. Her husband, John Alden of the sixth generation from the Pilgrim, is well remembered by the townspeople for his grave, dignified bearing, his snowy hair and ancient plaid cloak. The Major's store at the corner which he kept, changed not. The calico patterns that lay on the counter seemed ever the same. The boxes of ribbons and the identical jugs, pitchers and vases stood on the shelves year after year. No unbecoming haste was exhibited in displaying goods to customers and ever a respectable indifference to trade was maintained. Finally he passed away at a good old age, leaving two sons and a daughter, the eldest of whom, John, lives with his mother. The store at the corner was a half mile from the old Alden home and was a part of the house belonging to Major Judah Alden of Revolutionary memory.

With this digression we return to the birthday party. Many friends had called during the day bringing congratulations and leaving gifts of books and flowers. This afternoon, pleasant reminiscences of olden days were related, of evenings when the great room resounded to the strains of Uncle John's violin when Aunt Polly was the gayest of the gay keeping time to the music till the morning light brightened the sky. There were thoughts of Thanksgiving days that had come and gone with their festive cheer, and memories of births, weddings and deaths.

Neither would any Duxbury reunion be complete without its stories of Dr. Allyn's practical jokes and oddities and many kindnesses to the poor. Our hostess had been his neighbor and parishioner and enjoyed calling the old time back. Aunt Sarah Mack, too, was not forgotten. Though the pine trees have sighed their requiem over her grave for 50 years and no trace of her little hut remains in the Major's garden, the memory of her quaint figure and her doggerel rhymes remain and are woven into the traditions of the place.

Winsor's History will serve to keep alive the olden days, when generation after generation shall have passed away and the young who care little for what has been in the happy present and the glowing future, are actors on the scene.

At last the sunset lights gathered in the sky and the great grandchildren were called from their play in the sunny pasture, and all were gathered about the long supper table. After the tempting viands had been discussed in the usual way, the following poem written for the occasion by Miss Lullie Sargent of Melrose, was read.

TO AUNT POLLY

The birdlings sing gaily, the bees hum so low,
The wee Brooklets on to the wide ocean show
And Mother Earth clad in her summer robes bright,
Is teeming with laughter and gladness and light,
That the air is so sweet and the sky is so blue?
Your ninetieth birthday! And do you look back
Half sadly, perhaps, o'er the worn beaten track
Of your life, and regret that hard merciless fate
In her just and right dealings, with small and with great,
Hath portioned to you so much sorrow and woe?
Or is it a pleasure, Aunt Polly, to go
With lingering footsteps through memory's halls
And gaze at each picture hung there on the walls
Where Time with his palette and brushes doth paint?
Perhaps here a shadow so dim and so faint
That ere you perceive it 'tis o'er and forgot,
And here doth appear a low little cot

THE JOHN ALDEN HOUSE IN DUXBURY



Half shadow, half sunshine, dear homelike old place!
May no ruthless hand this bright memory deface!

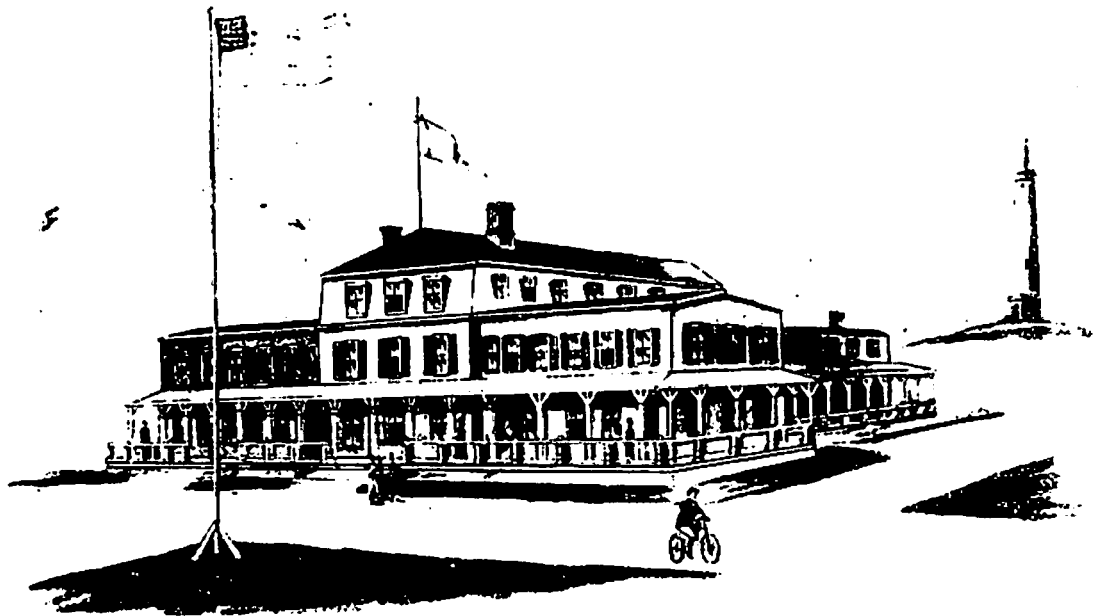
And here is a mingling of colors so gay,
How happy, Aunt Polly, you were on that day!
But come, dear old friend, kind and true, let us go
From the place; the dim past is all gone, you know.
And the present is all full of sunlight for you,
Whatever of sadness and future can show,
The present is happy and bright we all know.

So come, let us laugh and make merry and cry,
From the East to the West, from the earth to the sky,
And let the glad notes ring below and above -
Long life to Aunt Polly, the one we all love.



John Alden House (from booklet titled
"Summer Homes at Duxbury, Mass.")

THE OLD MYLES STANDISH HOUSE ON STANDISH SHORE



The Myles Standish House shown above stood on a bluff 300 feet from the shore of Duxbury Bay. Its half-mile of beach was noted as a bathing ground, the water being warmed by passing over the flats of Plymouth and Duxbury Bays. The total absence of an undertow made it particularly safe for women and children. The hotel had a golf course, tennis courts, croquet and ball grounds, and sail and row boats for ocean and bay fishing, not to mention a livery and boarding stable.

AUNT POLLY



After the reading of this beautiful poem the company dispersed to their several homes, leaving our aged friend with many wishes for a happy return. Another aged person lingers in the border-land in this goodly town of Duxbury - the widow of Dr. Rufus Hathaway, who, if she lives to September, will have completed her century, a century of active service, and comparatively vigorous mind and body still. Many changes have come over the town and to its families since the birth of Mrs. Hathaway, married at 15, a widow at 44, and mother of 11 children. She has proved her right to the doctrine of the survival of the fittest.

SWEET MEMORIES

One who comes back to the summer breezes of this sea-shore place, and drinks in its balmy air, will not wonder at the longevity of its people. It has been said that the people do not die but dry up and blow away. It is certainly a healthful place and if one lingers long enough to discover its beauties and enjoy its social pleasures, they will not fail to return.

R.A.B.

(Ruth Anne Bradford was a cousin of Miss Hattie Ford, who will be remembered by some of the older generation as a drawing (or art) teacher in the Town of Duxbury.